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For Today's Teens, Drug Threat Dwarfs Tobacco

Kids Respond to this Administration's Wink-and-a-Nod

In the tobacco debate, the Clinton Administration is insisting that new legislation, ostensibly aimed at preventing American teens from taking up a deadly habit, is an absolute imperative. The White House would like the picture to be as stark as "Vulnerable Children Versus Big Tobacco."

But there is a much more deadly — and more immediate — danger to our kids. That is the very real threat of teen use of illegal drugs. A recent poll taken by The Polling Company revealed that, in an open-ended question, 39 percent of parents worry about their kids taking drugs (only three percent mentioned tobacco use).

Parents have good reason to worry, as the rise in youth tobacco smoking pales in comparison to the rise in youth marijuana smoking. Since President Clinton took office, there has been an increase in the number of children who have smoked a tobacco cigarette in the last 30 days among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders — a jump amounting to 25, 39, and 31 percent, respectively. In same period, there has been an *overwhelmingly* larger increase in the number of children who have smoked marijuana in the last 30 days among 8th, 10th and 12th graders: 176 percent, 153 percent, and 99 percent, respectively.

Here's the math: *the rate of increase in youth pot smoking is seven (8th graders), four (10th), and three (12th) times the rate of increase with cigarette smoking.* At this growth rate, the small disparity that exists now between the gross numbers of youth pot and cigarette smokers will disappear in the very near future.

Not one kid will die this year because he lit his first cigarette, but thousands of American kids will die because they started using illegal drugs. Kids who start using drugs today may not get a chance to mature out of that habit as they well might with tobacco.

A Look at the Numbers Show Misplaced Priorities

The latest leading national annual survey showing the prevalence of youth smoking and drug abuse is the University of Michigan's "Monitoring the Future" study.

The Monitoring the Future study reveals that illicit drug use among America's schoolchildren has consistently increased throughout the Clinton Administration:

- For 8th graders, the proportion using *any illicit drug* in the prior 12 months has increased 71 percent since the year Clinton was first elected, and since 1992 it has increased 89 percent among 10th graders and 57 percent among 12th graders.
- *Marijuana use* accounted for much of the overall increase in illicit drug use, continuing its strong resurgence. Among 8th graders, use in the prior 12 months has increased 146 percent since 1992, the year President Clinton went on the campaign trail lamely claiming he “didn’t inhale.” Apparently, kids saw right through that line: Among 10th graders, annual prevalence has increased 129 percent; among 12th graders it increased 76 percent since 1992.
- Of particular concern, according to the survey, is the continuing rise in *daily marijuana use among 10th and 12th graders*. More than one in every twenty of today's high school seniors is a current daily marijuana user — a rise of 18.4 percent since only last year. While only 1.1 percent of 8th graders used marijuana daily in 1997, that still represents a 450-percent increase since 1992.
- Since President Clinton was first elected, *annual LSD use* has increased by more than 52 percent, 68 percent, and 50 percent among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders respectively.
- More than one in twenty seniors in the class of 1997 used *cocaine this year* — a 12.2-percent increase over just last year. *Crack cocaine* also continued a gradual upward climb among 10th and 12th graders. In short, since 1992, annual cocaine use is up 87 percent, 147 percent, and 77 percent among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders respectively.
- The longer-term gradual rise in the use of *amphetamine stimulants* also continued within the class of 1997 — increasing 7 percent since last year.
- Since 1992, annual *heroin usage* has increased by 83 percent, 141 percent, and 92 percent for 8th, 10th, and 12th graders respectively.

Is it appropriate, in the face of all this, to ignore illegal drug use, looking only at tobacco? One might respond that teen rates of tobacco smoking are also going up. It’s interesting to see that, in fact, teen tobacco use (as tracked in the “Monitoring the Future” report) has followed the same pattern as on drug use: a steady decline in the Reagan-Bush years, with a steady climb since 1992. Perhaps there is parallelism. But then the question might be, will a successful effort to reduce teen smoking also reduce teen use of illegal drugs? Or, on the other hand, will the black market for tobacco that this legislative inevitably will give birth to lead to an increase in illegal drugs? Imagine the truck parked in the woods behind the school, carrying contraband tobacco and perhaps an array of other illegal substances.

This Administration’s Abysmal Record

The drug policy of the Clinton Administration has been a miserable failure. From an early

slashing of funding for the White House anti-drug office, to the Administration's efforts to have it both ways on clean needles for addicts, to their efforts to *lower* penalties for crack cocaine to equal those for powder, to the President's grossly irresponsible "I wish I had inhaled" comment on *MTV*, this Administration has sent all the wrong signals — with predictable results.

Is this legislation a "smokescreen" for this administration to keep it from having to admit that the teen smoking increase is yet another symptom of its failed drug policy? Ask any parent if giving kids a-wink-and-a-nod on drugs doesn't seem to make more acceptable other bad habits.

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